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ABSTRACT

With approximately 50 percent of school administrators retiring over the next 10 years, school leader preparation programs are under pressure to admit adequate numbers of candidates to justify their costs and continued existence. Candidate recruitment and selection suffer, however, from ongoing practical problems including the use of grade-point averages, recommendations/references, Graduate Record Examination scores, writing samples, and personal interviews as primary criteria for assessing candidates' merits. Consequences are low standards of admission, lowered quality of instruction, diminished status of educational administration programs in the eyes of the public, and candidates' receiving credentials just by taking requisite courses. Auditioning candidates in much the same way as is done in the performing arts is recommended as a behavior-based way of evaluating how potential school leaders perform in real-life situations. Two scripted scenarios are described in which a candidate interacts with an irate parent over the phone, and another interacts personally with a concerned parent group. Assessment forms provide information on how effectively each scenario was handled in ways not necessarily addressed by traditional criteria. It is hoped that by adding the audition to school-leader selection criteria, the selection process itself will be improved. (Contains 21 references and 4 tables.) (RT)

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Lessons from the Performing Arts: Can Auditioning Improve the Selection Process in University Administration Preparation Programs in the 21st Century?

Theodore Creighton and Gary Jones

There is some evidence that a more proactive stance to the selection of potential school leaders in our university preparation programs has taken place over the last decade (Murphy, 1999). In rare cases, the selective measures have expanded beyond the traditional to include assessment center activities and interviews. Upon a more thorough inspection however, the majority of universities still rely primarily on the traditional measures of Graduate Record Examination scores, letters of recommendation, and grade point averages (Creighton & Jones, 2001).

University preparation programs are under pressure to take in adequate numbers of candidates to justify the program's costs and existence (Sarason, 1999). This pressure results in admitting individuals of borderline quality, using the usual criteria. With the projection of approximately 50% of current school administrators leaving our schools due to retirement in the next decade (Harris, 2000), it is more than crucial that we attract high quality applicants to school administration preparation programs. The selection process *can* and *must* be improved. This article points to the importance of the use of "behavior-based measurements" to select candidates for educational administration preparation programs. *Specifically, the recommendation is made to borrow a strategy used in the performing arts – the audition.*

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The Problem

The field of educational leadership has long been criticized for the ways in which men and women are prepared for school leadership positions (Murphy, 1999). In 1960, the American Association of School Administrators characterized the preparation of school superintendents and principals as dismal. Later Farquhar and Piele (1972) described university-based preparation programs as "dysfunctional structural incrementalism"(p. 17). As recently as 1990, Pitner discussed the "zombie programs" (p. 131) in educational administration. The most recent research in educational leadership reform warns that no aspect of our leadership preparation programs is more damaging than our reputation for being a haven for mediocre candidates. After 40 years of continued alerts, the field of educational administration still has serious problems in the ways candidates are recruited (if at all) and especially the ways candidates are selected into educational leadership preparation programs.

In1991, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) initiated a national study of recruitment and selection processes in UCEA member institutions. The focus of the study was to determine the existing practices relative to student recruitment and selection and to find what strategies were being implemented to attract minorities and women and other talented populations to educational administration preparation programs (Murphy, 1999). Of the then 50 UCEA member institutions, 40 participated.

The leading sources of evidence for determining program admission for students were: (a) grade point averages, (b) recommendations/references, (c) the Graduate Record Examination score, (d) the use of writing samples, (e) personal interviews, and (f) Millers

Analogies Test results. When participants were asked to provide their best judgement as to the weight given to each item in the selection process, they reported the GRE, grade point averages, recommendations, writing samples, and the personal interview.

Murphy (1999) reported on the changes in preparation programs from 1989 to 1996 by comparing survey responses from chairpersons of educational administration departments in 54 University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA) institutions. There was evidence of a "renewed commitment to employ selection tools in a thoughtful fashion in the service of collecting and assessing information about candidates" (p.178). Department chairs reported a use of personal interviews, examples of written work, and documentation of leadership experiences in the selection of candidates. Perhaps some limitations (or assumptions) of this study relate to whether or not accurate information was reported by department chairs, the relatively small sample size, and the somewhat bias selection of UCEA member universities.

In an effort to expand the research base, Creighton and Jones (2001) reviewed educational administration selection requirements at universities in U. S. and Canada. The results are not encouraging. Of the 350 university programs reviewed, only 7% (26) require the interview as part of the selection criteria, with an additional 2% (7) reporting the potential use of interviews, depending on quality and level of other criteria. The data collected revealed a continued dependence on Graduate Record Examination scores, undergraduate grade point average, and letters of recommendation as the most frequently used criteria in the selection of candidates for educational administration programs. Little evidence surfaced revealing the existence of *behavior-based measures* or consideration of documentation of leadership experiences.

The problem relates to how we recruit and select our school administrators for our university preparation programs. The most common recruitment/selection strategies accept future administrators into programs under three criteria: (a) grade point average, (b) Graduate Record Examination Scores (GRE), and (c) letters of recommendations with little evidence of consistent standards of acceptance (AACTE, 1994). Recent research has identified the criteria weighted most heavily in the selection of future administrators as the GRE score (Norton, 1994).

A secondary problem is whether the current admissions standards are sufficiently high to attract the "brightest and most capable candidates" to our programs (Norton, 1994, p.41). The UCEA study found on average, an undergraduate grade point average of 2.8, a graduate grade point average of 3.3, and a GRE score of only 950 (verbal and quantitative combined) being required for program admission. Present studies (Creighton & Jones, 2001) find these same averages in place today, ten years later. A particularly troubling finding reveals many university preparation programs have implemented a waiver of one or more of the requirements. For example, if a candidate has a higher than required grade point average, but scored low on the GRE, he/she is admitted on the basis of meeting one of the two requirements. Often, they are admitted "conditionally" with the condition being a completion of 6-9 hours of course work with at least a B average. The "haunting question" returns: What is the correlation between a student maintaining a B average and his/her administrative potential?

Data published in the GRE Guide reveal that students entering educational administration preparation programs from 1989 – 1992 attained GRE scores ranking fourth (4^{th}) from the bottom when compared with 41 graduate fields. Compared with ten

specific graduate education majors, educational administration ranked third from the bottom. The most recent GRE Guide (1999) containing data collected from over 2,775 educational administration majors during the years of 1996 – 1999, reports their scores ranking eighteenth (18th) from the bottom of 289 graduate fields and compared with the ten specific graduate education majors, educational administration ranked second (2nd) from the bottom.

The present use of Graduate Record Examination scores, undergraduate and graduate grade point averages, and letters of recommendation for the selection of candidates for school administration in isolation are not in question – they have their place – but when they are the sole basis for selection, they are and have been found to be only partially effective (Sarason, 1999). Although various selection criteria are used, the dominant one is grade point average; only limited attention is given to factors associated directly with administrative potential (Creighton & Jones, 2001).

The lack of rigorous recruitment and selection procedures has several potentially negative effects:

1. Weak recruitment and selection processes lower the quality of instruction offered, since courses are often geared to the background and intelligence of the students.
2. Easy entry diminishes the status of educational administration programs in the eyes of the public.
3. The candidates themselves realize that anyone can get the credential if he/she keeps paying for credits. (Cooper & Boyd, 1987)

4. Low standards of admission permit (and encourage) enrollment of candidates interested only in a master's degree in education with little intent of vigorously pursuing an administrative position. (Creighton & Jones, 2001)

Increasing the level of selection will result in a higher quality of administrator prepared by our universities, thus providing better principals and superintendents for the public schools in the nation. Many studies point to the importance of quality leaders (Fullan, 1994; Sarason, 1995; Schlechty, 1997; Sergiovani, 1996), and support exists for the stance that no amount of educational reform or restructuring will occur without strong effective school leadership. The prediction that as many as 50% of school administrators in the nation will leave their positions over the next five years due to retirement, relocation, and career change translates to the potential of replacing approximately half of the education leaders in our country in a relatively short period of time. Emphasizing that strong effective leaders have a direct effect on student achievement and on organizational change, the impact and potential for implementing major educational reform in this country is immense. A *window of opportunity* exists to radically improve the quality of education. Improving the recruitment and selection of our school administrators must become a high priority in our university preparation programs. How will we respond to this need for numbers? Will we address the supply and demand with current selection processes, or will we focus on the opportunity to improve quality and effectiveness in education? If the latter, we must be certain that our university recruitment and selection procedures are rigorous, effective, and cost efficient.

Auditions Versus Interviews

Several have suggested the need to view leadership as a performing art rather than a set of skills, competencies, and knowledge (Achilles & Mitchel, 2001; Sarason, 1999; Vaill, 1989). Graduate schools in the performing arts certainly require traditional criteria such as previous grades, test scores, and interviews, but no school accepts a student without an audition – they want to see how the student *performs*. Auditions are not interviews. They are samples of behavior displayed under real-life situations. We cannot afford to admit individuals into preparation programs without some form of audition which will give us a basis for assessing how they will interact with children, parents, and teachers in situations calling for inventiveness, spontaneity, and sensitivity (Sarason, 1999).

Interviews (and to some extent assessment center activities) usually focus on a predetermined set of questions or hypothetical situations and only allow the candidate to tell how and why and what he/she *would do* to handle the situation. Auditions, on the other hand, immerse the candidate into the real-life environment and require the candidate *to actually demonstrate (perform) a behavior*. What a person says he/she will do is far from correlated with what a person actually will do when confronted with the situation (Sarason, 1999). As in the performing arts, auditions used in administrative recruitment and selection do not require a perfect performance – we realize we are observing untrained individuals. But, does the candidate display the "qualities" necessary for performing effectively with children, parents, and teachers?

Though the interview is considered an important administrator screening tool (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983; Bryant, 1978; Pounder & Young, 1996; Schmitt & Cohen,

1990), candidate interviews are often unstructured, informal, and inconsistent. Even when highly structured selection guidelines are followed, it is difficult to predict future job performance, unless the selection system focuses on behavior-based measures.

Auditions provide an opportunity to observe the candidate in a realistic school environment. For example, auditions can focus on: (1) an unscheduled meeting with a hostile parent, (2) talking with a student contemplating suicide, (3) taking a phone call from an irate parent, or (4) presenting a report of declining standardized test scores to the board of education. More specific examples of auditions and their use will be reported later in this article.

Weaknesses of the Interview

Research has shown the interview to contain several weaknesses (http://www.hr-guide.com/data/G311.htm). Selection decisions based upon the interview reveal disproportionate rates of selection between minority and non-minority members. Decisions tend to be made within the first few minutes of the interview with the remainder of the interview used to validate or justify the original decision.

In a recent study, Salzman & Denner (1998) reported the traditional interview indicators tell us little about the affective, moral, or ethical dispositions of the students who are admitted into education programs. Goodlad (1990) suggests that "the responsible group of academic and clinical faculty members must seek out and select those candidates who reveal an initial commitment to the moral, ethical, and enculturating responsibilities to be assumed" (pp. 282-283). While some institutions have begun to use interviews as part of their admissions procedures, it is not clearly the case that the questions asked and the criteria are structured. Too often, interviews merely

contribute impressionistic data about a candidate's desire to enter the program rather than systematic evidence that admission standards have been met. Lacking such standards, interviews become at best "procedures for *screening* students *out* rather than *selecting* them *into* the program" (Salzman & Denner, 1998, p. 4).

In many cases, the interview questions are not *job related* resulting in the potential for racial and gender stereotypes in the interview process. In addition, evidence reveals a tendency to give negative information more weight than positive information. For the interview process to be effective, interviewers must: (a) avoid asking questions unrelated to the job, (b) avoid making quick decisions about the applicant, (c) avoid stereotyping applicants, (d) avoid giving too much weight to a few characteristics, and (e) maintain consistency in the questions asked. Because of these confounding variables, little evidence of the validity exists of the interview used for a selection procedure.

Validity of Selection Strategies

Schmitt & Cohen (1990) reported the validity coefficients of various selection techniques used to select managerial and professional employees, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Validity Coefficients for Management Selection Techniques

Selection Technique	Validity Coefficient
Interviews	.095
Biographical Information	-.011
Mental Ability Measured by Paper/Pencil	.186
Paper/Pencil Personality Inventory	.126
Assessment Center Activities	.325
Supervisory/Peer Ratings	.441

These results suggest that selection systems for managers that focus on behavior-based measures result in the highest validity. Though university preparation programs use assessment center activities on a limited basis, it is rare to receive appropriate supervisory/peer rating on our candidates, since most are not practicing administrators. Any supervisory rating (letters of recommendations) deal with the candidates performance as a classroom teacher or at best, the supervisor's prediction of a candidate's leadership qualities. Only the assessment center activities validity coefficient from the Schmitt study is significant to educational administration selection programs. However, along with work done by Ponder (1989) and Ponder and Young (1996), evidence reveals the following:

1. Administrator selection practices are often unsystematic and unstructured, rely heavily on interview impressions, and would be expected to have weak predictive powers.
2. Selection techniques should be designed to more nearly capture actual or simulated job behaviors.
3. Reliable and valid assessment of actual or simulated job behaviors may more readily represent genuine occupational qualifications than many of the traditional measures used in candidate screening.

Auditioning in Educational Administrative Preparation Programs: An Application

Auditions were a required component of the principal preparation program at Idaho State University from Fall semester 1997 through Spring semester 2000. During that time a total of 225 masters students preparing for the principalship went through an audition process. Though the process was used in this case as a way to identify strengths

and weaknesses of enrolled candidates, *the intent of this paper is to suggest and recommend that auditions be implemented as an additional strategy for selection of candidates before they are accepted into preparation programs.*

Methodology. As part of the course entitled, The Principalship, students were required to attend a full-day (Saturday) session consisting of a variety of auditioning activities. No individual names were used during the day; students began the day as a hypothetical principal and identified only by a number (e.g., A-1, A-2, A-3, etc.). Activities were scheduled in several rooms and individual offices, and in a manner whereby each student progressed through the activities during the day. Evaluators and judges were practicing teachers, principals, superintendents, university professors, and students. Each candidate's performance was judged and reviewed by at least 3 evaluators.

Approximately one week after completing the interview activities, principal candidates received an assessment of each activity based on the feedback of the evaluators. The purpose of the assessment report was to provide candidates with important information which could be used to identify individual areas of improvement. For instance, if a candidate received a weak assessment in the area of communications with parents, the candidate hopefully might use that information to select an additional elective course or perhaps attend a specific workshop dealing with effective communication skills.

The following examples of audition activities used during 1997-2000 comes from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management's Project-Based Learning Project (Bridges, 1994).

Specific audition activities included: (a) presenting a principal's report to a board of education, (b) talking with a student who reported physical contact by a classroom teacher, (c) handling a drunk and irate father wanting to see his son, and (d) presenting a supplies and materials budget reduction at a teachers' meeting. Two others are provided here along with procedures and assessment reports.

Audition #1, Irate Parent Phone Call. Students answered a phone call from an angry parent at scheduled times in a location previously announced (e.g., private office). Evaluators performed the role of the irate parent making the call from another office, and were accompanied by two additional evaluators. The parent script follows:

> You are Mrs. Robert Wills and want your son transferred out of
> Mrs. Jones' room.
> Your son is Joe, an 8th grader.
> You have aspirations for him to attend college and it is important
> that he do well in school and learn.
> Your son Joe is not learning anything in Mrs. Jones' class – it
> is a total waste of time.
> You want your son transferred to Mrs. Johnson; Joe likes her
> and learned a lot from her when he had her last year.
> There must be other parents who feel the same way –
> have you heard from any of them? What are you going to do about it?
> Indicate you don't care if the principal denies the request.
> Your son Joe is a special case, and the principal better reconsider.
> If he doesn't transfer Joe, he will hear from you.

You mean business!

And you intend to talk with the Board President and Superintendent.

The candidate's responses are listened to on a speaker phone allowing the evaluators to hear the conversation. Both the irate parent and the candidate are in the privacy of individual offices and the candidate is in no way identified by name. How is the candidate's audition evaluated?

The evaluation form consists of administrative constructs and descriptors taken from NAESP, NASSP, and NPBEA assessment documents used in professional assessment center simulations. A completed assessment form used in the *irate parent phone call* audition is shown in Table 2.

The important issue, as with auditions in the performing arts, is not necessarily a perfect performance, but whether or not the candidate possesses the important qualities required in the handling of an irate parent phone call. You will notice that additional comments focus on constructive criticism and allow the candidate to reflect on areas of improvement. The assessment obviously involves subjective decisions by the evaluators. These decisions however, are based on many years of experience of practicing teachers, administrators, and university faculty. The point is that our profession is currently depending excessively on objective data (test scores and grade averages) when accepting candidates into principal preparation programs. Sarason (1999) argues that selecting only on the basis of conventional objective data is not justifiable on moral and educational grounds. He continues by making an analogy to the performing arts: "if you want to predict who will make a good actor, you have to see them act, keeping in mind that you are observing an amateur" (p. 99).

Table 2. Irate Parent Call Assessment Form

Student Identification Number_____A-1_____

Communication look-fors	1	2	3	4	5
conveys ideas and opinions succinctly	__	__	_X_	__	__
expresses clear and concise language	__	__	_X_	__	__
checks for understanding	__	_X_	__	__	__
uses appropriate language	__	__	_X_	__	__
exhibits sensitivity to parent concerns	__	_X_	__	__	__
renders a timely and appropriate decision	__	_X_	__	__	__
displays appropriate listening skills	__	_X_	__	__	__

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

1. Appeared in a hurry to get the parent off the phone.
2. Be careful about putting the responsibility on the parent to check these issues out – that's why she's calling you.
3. Be more explicit about what steps you will take.
4. Strive to show empathy to the parent and at the same time be supportive of the teacher.

Note: The administrator constructs and descriptors listed above are to be used as "look-fors" as the audition activity unfolds. Additional comments will help with the assessment of the individual. Observation should be rated on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating little evidence and 5 representing strong evidence.

Audition #2. Concerned Parent Group. Students individually entered a room to meet a group of concerned parents, role played by a teacher, principal, and university professor. The student received the following script approximately 30 minutes prior to the meeting:

> A concerned parent group wants to meet with you. This watchdog group wants to know how well your eighth-grade students have done on the statewide standardized test in reading, written language, and mathematics for each of the past three years. The group wants to know what the numbers are and how to interpret them. You are to make a brief presentation (5 minutes) to this group. The test results for the last three years are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Eight-Grade Test Results

	Rank of School Statewide Eight Grade (Expressed in Percentiles)		
Year	1	2	3
Reading	80	80	70
Written Language	90	60	50
Mathematics	90	70	50

As with audition #1, the issue here is not a perfect performance necessarily, but whether or not the candidate possesses the important qualities required in the handling of a concerned parent group. In many cases, students incorrectly explained the meaning of

percentile ranks and stated, "the 50th percentile means your son answered half the questions correct." Some excused the decline in scores because of weak teachers and others stated that there had been an increase in Hispanic and African American students over the last several years. An assessment form of an especially *low-performing* candidate is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Concerned Parent Group Assessment Form

Student Identification Number_____B-3_____

Communication look-fors	1	2	3	4	5
adequately explains data	_X_	__	__	__	__
exhibits sensitivity to parent concerns	__	_X_	__	__	__
accepts responsibility for school data	_X_	__	__	__	__
checks for understanding	__	_X_	__	__	__
uses appropriate language	__	_X_	__	__	__
displays appropriate listening skills	__	_X_	__	__	__

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

1. Did not accept responsibility – made the situation worse by saying that the district hired several weak teachers over the last three years.
2. Said to the parents that test scores were not that "big of a deal."
3. Talked all the time – did not ask if the parents understood.
4. Made light of the situation and talked down to the group.

The performance of this particular aspiring principal failed to display evidence of qualities of effective leadership such as: (a) exhibiting sensitivity to parent concerns, (b) recognizing the importance of parent issues, and (c) displaying appropriate listening skills. Certainly, some of these qualities can be nurtured and improved upon during the educational administration preparation program. However, one must suspect that this individual lacks many of the basic skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary in effective school leadership. The candidate actually went on to graduate from the program but to the date of this writing has not secured a position in educational administration. As the former coordinator of educational administration programs at this candidate's university, I am troubled still as to why we did not make a decision of rejection in this case. In retrospect, I believe we made a professional, moral, and ethical mistake in accepting a candidate with such "borderline characteristics and qualities" of effective leadership, not to mention a disservice to the individual.

Conclusion

We must discontinue the practice of admitting candidates to leadership preparation programs on the sole basis of the variety of non-behavior based measures such as test scores, interviews, and letters of recommendation. These measures do not give us an estimate of how the candidate will interact with individuals and groups encountered on a daily basis at the school site. The audition process can help us assess candidates in situations calling for "inventiveness, spontaneity, and sensitivity" (Sarason, 1999, p. 113).

Again, the suggestion is not to ignore grade point averages, recommendations, and Graduate Record Examination scores in the selection process. The measures, though

of limited value, give us important information on the candidate. But the audition gives us an additional assessment of the candidate through a more valid *behavior-based measure*. Creating audition situations along with valid and reliable ways of assessing them is time consuming, more expensive than traditional methods, and involves a commitment from faculties, departments, and colleges of education.

In discussing the selection of today's teachers, Seymour Sarason (1999) states the following:

> I should hasten to add that the selection of teachers is by no means the only major problem in our educational system. But it is a major problem, and to deny that is to indulge ignorance, to avoid accountability, and to continue to short change future generations of students and teachers. (p.113)

I urge you to substitute the word administrator for the word teacher in the above. It is appropriate to consider whether the audition added to the traditional selection criteria can improve the quality of perspective educational leaders and in turn practicing principals and superintendents.

The temptation to de-emphasize recruitment and selection is done at the risk of compromising educational administration program quality, and to assume that the correct mix of high quality candidates will be available to fill the huge number of anticipated vacancies in the next decade is a terrible mistake. Acceptance into school administration preparation programs should indicate more than perseverance and one's willingness to complete the courses. It should indicate that some of our best, most well-prepared, and most creative people have entered the field. The time has come to take a more rigorous approach to the selection and training of school administrators.

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